

Arlington

I tied the knot on the back of my dress with steady fingers, staring over my shoulder at my reflection in the mirror. The black dress was one that I rarely wore, although my husband always said he liked it. The regular white dots were appealing in their regularity, row after row on the same solid plain of black, ending at the dress's hem over my knees, each dot stopping predictably at the edge of the fabric. The matching hat was similarly ordinary, with the brim extending only an inch away from the crown. A short sheet of black lace hung down over my eyes, but I would be grateful for the shade in the August heat. I adjusted the hat with lightly wrinkled fingers, with my simply groomed fingernails scraping against the fabric.

At a call from down the stairs, I turned and walked to my desk, my heels clicking on the wooden floor as I grabbed my small black purse. A thought caused me to pause for a moment as my eyes went to the small box in the corner, and I acted on the impulse to pull a few of the tissues from it and stuff them into my purse before turning smartly and leaving the room. The pictures remained in place, smiling faces staring at the back of my head from their frames, as if the memories were watching me go.

There were a few sparse clouds in the suburban sky as I left the house on my husband's arm, walking past the aged tire swing dangling from the tree in the front yard, the frayed rope swaying in the light breeze. The end of the driveway watched me as I trod down past it, drawing me with echoes of lemonade stands and school buses, laughter and excited chatter. My gaze lingered on the spot as I got in the passenger seat of the car, a firm but gentle hand on my knee telling me that my companion was sitting beside me.

The drive through town was silent, but unmatched by the silence that greeted us as we arrived, with ghost comments drifting past my notice and fog handshakes meeting my consciousness like a wind against a door. The only hand that really existed was the steadying grip on my shoulder, which guided me through the grassy plain, punctuated by white stones that dotted the hill as regularly as the pattern on my suddenly too warm dress. The only words that truly mattered began in a low drone as the sun shone overhead, the uniformed orator speaking in what was meant to be the appropriate tone and cadence. I'm sure that in

his mind, they probably seemed appropriate, but to my mind, they were pyrite trying to be gold, with the gold beyond his reach.

I stood staring at the colored banner that covered my heart as the procession continued, my eyes seeing neither the stars nor the stripes, but only the baby I had held in my arms. I saw the careless smile of childhood and felt the warmth of an embrace around me more vividly than I felt the stifling August sun.

It was raining. The cloudless sky was dampening my face to match the saturation within my chest. The stripes blurred together as I felt the world end, dragging on in its moment of finale like a wounded dog dragging its broken leg. The hand on my shoulder squeezed lightly as a small triangle was placed in my arms, as if it was some magic charm that would help forestall the fall of the stars. Clearly, it didn't, or else the noon sun would have kept the world from going dark.

I stared up at the sky as streams ran down my cheeks, with seven punctuations to the silence marching with regularity. Pointless. Who were they trying to fool?

The long box disappeared into the earth, covering my heart with a layer of dust so it would match the rest that lined the hillside. The hearts buried there were countless, and outnumbered the headstones. Here, my heart would stay. Here, the tears would always fall.